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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/15/2019  
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SUBJECT: GAZA SITREP, JANUARY 15, 1230 - GAZA ON FIRE

Classified By: DCM Luis G. Moreno. Reason 1.4 (b/d)

11. Summary: (S//REL USA, ACGU) Israeli-fired artillery rounds struck a warehouse on the UNRWA compound in Gaza City between 0900 and 1000 local on January 15, sparking a fire that threatens fuel storage sites and wounding three. The Embassy has been in contact with IDF Southern Command to urge that they cease firing on UN facilities, and have urged the IDF and the Joint Coordination Room (JCR) to put out what the UNRWA representatives are referring to as a phosphorus fire that threatens nearby fuel depots. Israeli forces continued to operate primarily in the northern Gaza Strip on January 15, striking 70 targets overnight. USDAO reporting suggests that Israeli preparations for operations in the south appear at or near completion. Palestinian militants fired 15 rockets into Israel as of 1100 local, causing no injuries. Palestinian Health Ministry officials in Gaza reported that 1028 Palestinians had been killed since Operation Cast Lead began; between 10 and 35 Palestinians were killed overnight. Israel has announced a four-hour pause in fighting for humanitarian purposes today, but it is unclear whether this will be a meaningful lull. The Karni, Nahal Oz, Erez, and Kerem Shalom crossings were all open, with 170 trucks expected to pass through today. Fuel shipments were backlogged at Nahal Oz, however. Israeli officials reported that electricity production in the Gaza Strip is operating at a higher capacity than it was prior to hostilities, but the status of the grid is unclear. Israeli officials also highlighted their humanitarian efforts, including their work on developing access routes within Gaza for residents to reach hospitals and border crossings, but there are also reports that Gaza hospitals have been shelled. Israel media reported on Hamas's somewhat positive - yet ambiguous - response to an Egyptian cease-fire proposal that reportedly included an immediate Israeli withdrawal, a long-term "hudna," and the reopening of the Rafah crossing in accordance with the agreement signed by Egypt, the Palestinian Authority, and Israel upon Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005. Ministry of Defense Political Military Bureau chief Amos Gilad is scheduled to travel to Cairo today to discuss Egyptian mediation efforts. Meantime, UNSYG Ban Ki-Moon is in Israel today meeting with Israeli leaders to pursue a cease-fire. Israeli media highlighted continuing divisions among Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Defense Minister Ehud Barak, and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni about the direction of Israel's military operation against Hamas. An Israeli poll, however, showed strong support among the Israeli public for the conduct of the war to date. End Summary.

MILITARY UPDATE

12. (C) On the morning of January 15 at around 0900 and 1000, Israeli ordnance and shrapnel hit the UNRWA compound in Gaza City, and fires in and around the compound area threaten fuel depots nearby, according to an UNSCO contact and UNRWA's John Ging (in an interview with Al-Jazeera at 1230). Two of the 700 people on the UNRWA compound were wounded as was one

UNRWA staffer, according to Ging. Ging reported that the UNRWA garage has burned down and the thousands of tons of food and medical supplies in the UNRWA warehouse are in jeopardy. Israeli spokesman have not publicly confirmed that Israeli forces hit the UN facilities, but Ging reported that MOD Barak had apologized to UNSYG Ban Ki-Moon today. The Embassy has been in contact with IDF Southern Command to urge that they cease firing on UN facilities. We have also urged the IDF and Joint Coordination Room (JCR) to take action to put out the phosphorus fire that threatens the nearby fuel depots.

13. (SBU) Israeli radio reported that 15 rockets had been fired from Gaza into Israel as of 0930 local. There were no injuries reported. The barrage today follows the 16 rockets fired yesterday, including a purported phosphorous shell that exploded in an open area. These firings are down from the 30-80 rockets that Palestinian groups fired into Israel during the first two weeks of the conflict. Eleven IDF troops were lightly injured overnight. Air Force jets struck 70 targets overnight, with the Israeli navy also providing support for ground operations. IDF targets included a mosque reportedly used to store weapons, 14 rocket launch sites, 5 weapon storage facilities, and one tunnel located under a home. IDF forces this morning appear to be moving into Gaza City - where many Amcits reside - from three directions. Israeli naval forces intercepted a Greek-flagged "Free Gaza" vessel that was carrying aid to Palestinians in Gaza, along with numerous peace activists. Media reports that the vessel was turned around without incident and was headed toward Cyprus.

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14. (S//REL USA, ACGU) USDAO reports that while operations continue to focus on the northern Gaza Strip, preparations appear to be near complete for activities to expand in the south.

#### HUMANITARIAN UPDATE

15. (SBU) Palestinian Health Ministry officials in Gaza reported that 1028 Palestinians had been killed in Operation Cast Lead, with more than 4,500 wounded. These sources claimed that more than half of the deaths have been civilians. Between ten and 35 Palestinians were reportedly killed overnight, and it looks likely that there will be the potential for significant civilian casualties as a consequence of this morning's fighting in Gaza City. Thousands of civilians are fleeing, but many are trapped in buildings, according to press reports. Israeli forces reportedly struck two hospitals in Gaza City and were reportedly surrounding two others.

16. (SBU) Israel announced a four-hour humanitarian pause in the fighting to begin at 1100, but it is unclear whether this will be a meaningful lull or not. According to Israeli officials, Karni crossing is open and is expected to process 60 truckloads of grain and animal feed. Nahal Oz fuel depot is open, but no more fuel can be transferred until the existing fuel on the Gaza side is picked up. Erez is open for humanitarian evacuations, but Israeli officials have not yet received a list of names of those expected to pass through. The attempt to run up to 25 cargo trucks through Erez has been put off again. Kerem Shalom is slated to process 110 truckloads, including 5 tankers; 106 truckloads pass through Kerem Shalom the previous day. Electricity production in the Gaza Strip is operating at 74% of capacity, which marks an improvement over the situation prior to Operation Cast Lead, according to Israeli officials, but is not necessarily indicative of the state of Gaza's grid. Needed repairs and drainage at the Beit Lahiya sewage lagoon did not take place on January 14 despite ICRC/IDF coordination to ensure safe passage of the repair crew. The Palestinian crew arrived unprepared, but will make another attempt today.

¶7. (SBU) Israel continues to highlight its efforts to improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza. JCR will brief DCMs and media January 15 at 1400 local on humanitarian efforts to date, and we will seek information about the humanitarian impact of the military events reported this morning. Israeli officials told Econoff that they are working on devising humanitarian access routes to and from hospitals, and through Rafah for evacuations. Haaretz reported that the IDF has 120 officers attached to command posts who deal with special requests from Palestinians for food and medicine, the evacuation of the sick and wounded, and help move civilians away from the fighting. These officers, who coordinate with UNRWA and the ICRC, have arranged for at least 150 transfers of injured Palestinians to hospitals in Gaza.

#### EGYPTIAN MEDIATION EFFORTS

¶8. (U) Israeli media reported on Hamas's response to the Egyptian cease-fire proposal, with some reports suggesting that Hamas had agreed in principle to the Egyptian plan, while other reports stressed that Hamas's response was ambiguous and that Hamas leaders were wrangling over interpretations of the Egyptian initiative. According to a report in Ma'ariv, the proposal included an immediate Israeli withdrawal, a long-term "hudna," and the reopening of the Rafah crossing in accordance with the agreement signed by Egypt, the Palestinian Authority, and Israel upon Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005. Notably, several Israeli reports heaped praise on the Egyptians for the hard-line Cairo is taking with Hamas and for the apparent results it is garnering. Ministry of Defense Political Military Bureau chief Amos Gilad is scheduled to travel to Cairo today for talks on the cease-fire and to press Egypt to improve its efforts to combat smuggling from the Sinai into Gaza.

#### OTHER DIPLOMATIC MANEUVERING

¶9. (U) Olmert, Barak and Livni are scheduled to meet with UNSYG Ban Ki-Moon today during the UNSYG's visit to Israel today to try to arrange a cease-fire. France and Germany are prepared to give guarantees for the prevention of arms smuggling and the opening of crossing points into Gaza as part of a permanent cease-fire, according to a joint statement from the two countries. Qatar announced that it had the necessary legal quorum to convene an emergency Arab

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League summit on Doha on January 16, while Gulf leaders will meet today in Riyadh to discuss developments in Gaza.

#### ISRAELI POLITICS

¶10. (U) Olmert on January 14 reportedly accused Barak of deliberately sabotaging the diplomatic steps being taken to reach the war's goals. The dispute is part of the lingering disagreements among Israel's leadership troika on how to proceed; Olmert wants to push forward, while Barak and Livni are prepared to accept a cease-fire. Olmert was particularly angry that Barak in background briefings continues to suggest - after earlier agreeing to present a united front -- that the Israeli operation had "exhausted itself" and that Israel should seek an immediate cease-fire. Barak also reportedly floated the idea of a week-long humanitarian cease-fire, which he did not coordinate with Olmert. The two met on Wednesday evening and reportedly cleared up their disagreements, but Olmert hammered home his point in a security cabinet meeting that night when he showed intelligence reports that suggested Hamas had toughened its positions in reaction to the apparent split among the Israeli leaders.

¶11. (U) Strategic disagreements, while not flaring in public, are found elsewhere in the Israel establishment.

Haaretz reported that during meetings of the IDF General Staff, officials have said that Israel already has achieved all that it possibly could in Gaza. In contrast, the IDF's Southern Command, along with the Shin Bet, are pushing for a continuation of hostilities to further weaken Hamas.

#### PUBLIC OPINION

¶12. (U) Israeli media reported on a Tel Aviv University poll that showed 94% of the public supported the operation in Gaza, with 90% of Israelis agreeing that Israel should continue "until all of the operation's goals are met." Barak earned the confidence of 62% of those polled, with Livni and Likud Chairman Benjamin Netanyahu garnering 53%, while Olmert bottomed out the list with 44% of Israelis expressing confidence in the premier.

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